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Religion, Ethnicity and Language Learning Strategies

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Introduction

The cultural backgrounds of learners affect their language learning strategy choices (Levine, Reves, & Leaver, 1996; Oxford, 1996; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Rubin, 1975). Studies done in various parts of the world show learners' strategy choices positively correlate with their cultural backgrounds.

Various elements constitute the cognitive and behavioural aspects of culture. In other words cultures are unified entities (Hall & Hall, 1990) in which cognitive and behavioural elements exhibit strong interdependent relationships. It is then important to consider the elements that make human beings organize their behaviour and thought according to their living environment. These elements are the parts into which culture can be anatomised. Among a variety of elements, ethnicity and religion have particular relevance to the notion of culture.

Religion and ethnicity

Religion is an important element of the culture of a given community (De Waal Malefijt, 1968; Eliot, 1962; Geertz, 1968; Howard, 1996; Lawson & McCauley, 1990; Vernon, 1962). Religion binds people into a sacred community and therefore it has the power to make any social group into a religious group (Turner, 1991). It is also important to note that there is no known society in which religion has not played a part (Bowker, 2002). In fact, religion is a force that significantly interacts with other cultural institutions (De Waal Malefijt, 1968) such as family, law, marriage, politics and education etc, shaping how these institutions behave and operate (Vernon, 1962). Religion finds expression in human behaviour, in value systems, morals and ethics shaping how people perceive the

outer world and interact with one another (Eliot, 1962; Howard, 1996).

The fusion of religion and culture is so strong that some writers (Eliot, 1962; Vernon, 1962) emphasize the indivisible nature of these two variables as follows:

We do not talk of religion and culture...but rather emphasize that religion is culture (Vernon, 1962, p. 39).

...the culture will appear to be the product of the religion, or the religion the product of the culture (Eliot, 1962, p. 15).

Ethnicity is another important element that constitutes culture. People in a particular ethnic group are bound together by a common culture (Bedell & Oxford, 1996). Ethnic groups use languages associated with their ethnic identities (Fishman, 1999; Howard, 1996) and where possible they signal ethnicity by the language they choose to use. Ethnic identities are also marked by religious differences (Howard, 1996) but this may not be completely true for all the people in a given community. For example, in Sri Lanka the Sinhalese ethnic community is predominantly Buddhist but there are a few believers of Christian and Hindu faiths. In the same manner, a few members of the Tamil community, which is predominantly Hindu, are followers of Buddhism and the Christian faith. In most cases, however, ethnicity and religion work as a combined force, making it difficult to distinguish which of those two variables makes the stronger contribution to culture.

For example, both ethnicity and religion in combination significantly influence ($p < .001$) all three language learning strategy types (metacognitive, cognitive and social affective) in Sri Lanka (Liyanage, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). In these studies, the subjects comprised three distinct subcultures in Sri Lanka – Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim. These subjects' ethnic identity is marked by religious identity; the Sinhalese were Buddhists, the Tamils were Hindus, and the Muslims were followers of Islam. Because of the close identification between ethnicity and religion in Sri Lanka it was difficult to discern whether the learners' ethnicity or religion more significantly contributed in their choice of language learning strategies.

Therefore, the present study attempts to identify which of these variables (ethnicity or religion) is the overriding variable in determining students' language learning strategies.

Methodology

The present study extends previous studies (Liyanage, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) of Sri Lankan subjects by including a sample of Japanese subjects. The sample for the present study comprised four ethnic groups, with 1027 participant responses included in the analysis. Of these, 14% ($N = 141$) were Japanese students, 30% ($N = 303$) were Sinhalese students, 28% ($N = 283$) were Tamil students, and the remaining 29% ($N = 300$) were Muslims. The percentage of Japanese female students (57%) was more or less equivalent to that in other groups (Muslims: 53%; Sinhalese: 50%; Tamil: 49%). All members of the sample were from a similar age range (16–18 years) and have studied English for an equal period of time approximately. The Sinhalese use Sinhala as their first language and the Tamils and Muslims use Tamil as their mother tongue. Japanese is the first language of the Japanese group.

The rationale for including the Japanese sample was that although the Japanese were ethnically different from the Sinhalese, they were similar in terms of religious identity.

The Sinhalese and Japanese subjects are Buddhists and Tamils are Hindus. The Muslims are adherents of Islam. As a result of this inclusion, the two religiously similar but ethnically different groups could be compared to the other two groups (Tamil-Hinduism and Muslim-Islam) with closely related ethnic and religious identities. Similarities between the Japanese and Sinhalese groups would indicate that religious identity had superior influence on the learners' choice of language learning strategies. On the other hand, marked differences between these two groups would indicate the superior influence of ethnicity.

A language learning strategy inventory (LLSI), based on and adapted from the language learning strategy inventory designed by Chamot and her associates (see Chamot et al, 1987) was used for data collection in the current study. In adapting the original, changes were made at lexical, phrasal, and sentential levels but the structure of the original inventory was closely followed.

The adapted LLSI had 63 items and underneath each item was a four-point Likert scale (1, 2, 3, and 4). The respondents were required to read the items and rate how often they utilized the behaviours described in them. The items gathered information about a total of 26 strategies under metacognitive, cognitive and social affective headings; out of the 63 items 20 items measured metacognitive strategies, 34 items measured cognitive strategies and 9 items measured social affective strategies.

In the previous study, the adapted LLSI was designed to elicit data from subjects studying English as a second language and whose mother tongues were Sinhala and Tamil, so the inventory had to be translated into these two languages. The reliabilities for these three scales (metacognitive, cognitive and social affective) for both versions have been reported before (For a detailed discussion on reliability see Liyanage, 2004). For the purpose of collecting data from the Japanese sample, the adapted LLSI was translated into Japanese (English to Japanese).

Data collection took place in two locations; data from the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim groups were collected in Sri Lanka and the data from the Japanese group were collected in Queensland, Australia.

Data analysis

In the initial analysis, gender and group differences were examined in relation to metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective learning strategies.

As shown in Figure 1, there was a consistent pattern of gender differences across the three learning strategy types and the four groups, except in the case of Tamils in relation to cognitive strategies and Muslims in relation to social-affective strategies. It is also clear that Japanese and Sinhalese groups obtained lower average scores for metacognitive, cognitive and social affective strategy types than Tamil and Muslim groups.

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine associations between scale scores for three learning strategy scores (metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective), entered as dependent variables (DVs) and participant identifications in terms of group (Japanese, Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim) and gender (male, female), entered as independent variables (IVs).

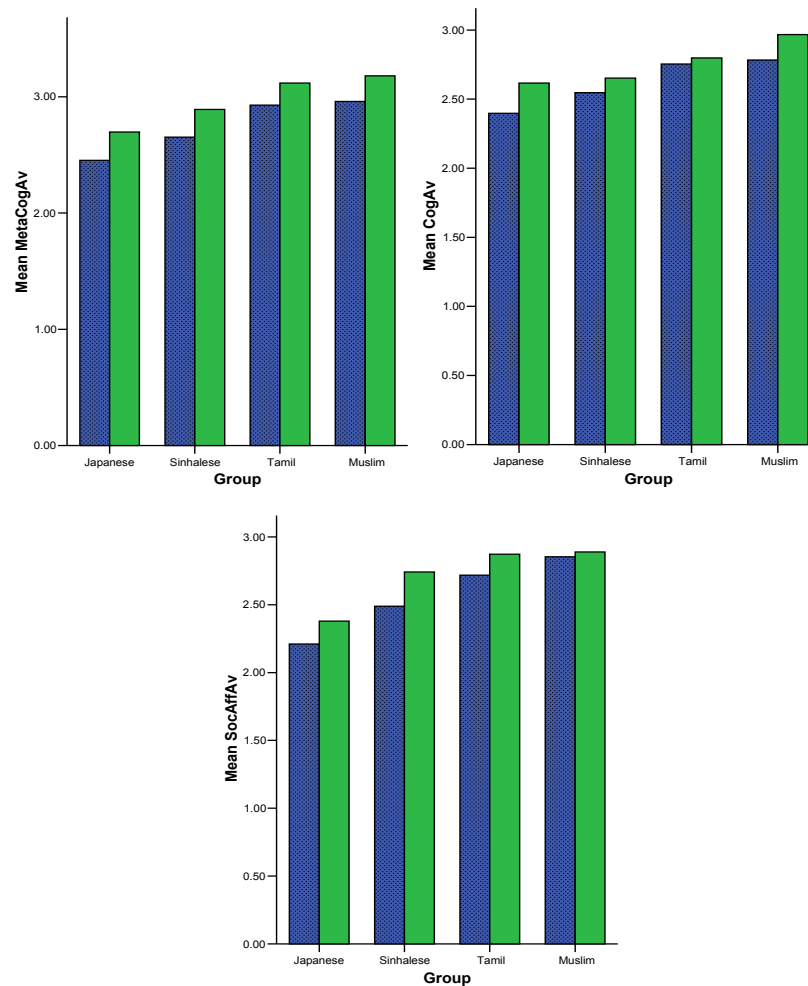


Figure 1.

Group differences in relation to the three learning strategies (males indicated by stippled pattern)

Table 1

Multivariate effects for learning strategies as a group

EFFECT	VALUE	F	HYPOTHESIS DF	ERROR DF	SIG.
Group	.177	20.627	9.000	2958.000	.000
Gender	.062	21.810(a)	3.000	984.000	.000
Group * gender	.027	2.931	9.000	2958.000	.002

As shown in Table 1, multivariate associations between the two demographic variables and the three learning strategy scores were all significant, indicating that group, gender, and the interaction between these each predicted the three learning strategy scores.

Table 2

Univariate effects for group and gender in relation to the three learning strategies

IV	DV	TYPE III SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	P
Group	Metacognitive	28.926	3	9.642	55.370	0.000
	Cognitive	17.273	3	5.758	33.037	0.000
	Social-affective	29.227	3	9.742	45.028	0.000
Gender	Metacognitive	11.050	1	11.050	63.459	0.000
	Cognitive	4.030	1	4.030	23.125	0.000
	Social-affective	5.402	1	5.402	24.970	0.000
Group * Gender	Metacognitive	0.128	3	0.043	0.245	0.865
	Cognitive	1.034	3	0.345	1.977	0.116
	Social-affective	1.872	3	0.624	2.884	0.035
Error	Metacognitive	171.698	986	0.174		
	Cognitive	171.839	986	0.174		
	Social-affective	213.329	986	0.216		

As shown in Table 2, above, follow-up analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that while group and gender were associated significantly with all three learning strategies, the interaction of the two was only associated significantly with the scale score for social-affective learning strategies.

Consistent with trends illustrated in Figure 1, an examination of marginal mean estimates indicated the significance of main effects for group and gender; with Muslims and Tamils scoring significantly better as groups than did the Sinhalese and Japanese students, and also with females obtaining significantly higher scores for each of the three learning strategies than males. Finally, gender differences were lower for Muslim students than for participants in other groups (see Figure 1).

Discussion

Liyanage (2003a, 2004) has previously reported a pattern of differences for Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim students. In summary, those two studies indicated that amidst a host of other variables, ethnicity/religion is centrally and significantly related to second language learning strategies both at the general and particular levels. What emerges with the addition of the Japanese sample is the similarity of Japanese and Sinhalese scores, both in terms of the group average and the pattern of gender differences.

One interpretation is that the pattern of group differences found in the Sri Lankan study extends to Japanese students in a conceptually sensible manner. That is, the pattern of group and gender based differences for metacognitive, cognitive and social affective average scores are such that the two groups with common religious values (i.e., Japanese

students & Sinhalese students) differ in similar ways from Tamils and Muslims. This common pattern is consistent with religious identity rather than ethnic identity being most important in determining the selection of learning strategies.

The current finding that gender is associated significantly with all three strategy types and that there are similar patterns of gender differences across the two groups that share the same religious identity (Japanese, Sinhalese) also support a conclusion that religion is important in terms of observed gender differences in relation to the selection of language learning strategy choices. The socialisation processes for individuals and biological differences between the sexes, individual and collectively, undoubtedly plays a part in producing observed differences in second language learning. The authors here however, view gender as a construct shaped by historical, cultural and ethno-religious factors and their interaction in a given social context (Crawford, 1995; Crawford & Gentry, 1989; Ellis, 1994; Goldstein, 2001; Pierce, 1995; Sunderland, 1994; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001). Within such a framework, one might expect gender differences in language learning to vary from culture to culture and with religious identity.

Methodologically, the conceptually sensible manner in which general and specific patterns of results extend from the Sri Lankan to the Japanese sample is also indicative of the reliability of the measures. The question of validity (in relation to content or construct validity etc) is however, separate and requires further attention.

Conclusion

The institutions of religion and education are interdependent across the range of known social groups (Vernon, 1962). For example, religious establishments such as temples, churches and mosques in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity were the first schools for the followers of those religions and Holy Scriptures like the Tri-Pitaka, Vedas, the Bible and the Qur'an were the first text books (Friess & Schneider, 1965). These traditional religious educational systems have been replaced with western style school education systems hundreds of years ago in most parts of the world. Nonetheless, the deep rooted impressions these earlier systems made on societies still play a part in how they view and value education (Liyanage, 2004). These religious views, values and practices continue to condition the way students learn, as affirmed by the pattern of similarities and differences reported in this study of Sri Lankan and Japanese groups.

Based on the current findings with the Sinhalese and Japanese students, it seems evident that the religious identity of the learners is more important in determining the selection of learning strategies than ethnic identity. The authors, however, acknowledge the need for replication studies in various other contexts (e.g., with ethnically different Muslim and ethnically different Hindu students). Nevertheless, the conclusion reached in the present study has potentially serious implications for various contexts. In particular, it should signal the need for care to be exercised in ESL teacher training programs to avoid the exclusive focus on Western methodologies which may be inappropriate in contexts where long-standing religious influences have predisposed learners to prefer particular culturally determined learning strategies.

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